

## Spiritual Olympians: Weightlifting

Matt. 11:25-30

Aug. 29, 2004

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One of the reasons I enjoy watching the Olympics so much is to see the incredible physical condition these athletes are in. When you see a slow-motion shot of a swimmer or a runner, their bodies are just rippling with muscles, not an ounce of fat on them, like they were chiseled out of a block of marble. It reminds me of me, before I discovered Krispy Kremes..

Today we continue our sermon series on becoming spiritual Olympians. Last week we talked about the importance of practicing our faith by getting out of the boat and swimming – or walking – to Jesus. Next week we'll talk about how having faith is like running a race. But this week, we're going to focus on strengthening our faith through weightlifting.

I want you to meet Shane Hamman. Shane is a 32-year-old weightlifter from Oklahoma City who is competing in the Olympics this year. Shane has been lifting weights since he was 9 years old. A 9-year-old weightlifter – think anybody tried to steal his lunch money?

Shane has grown a bit since he was nine – listen to these numbers. He weighs 344 pounds. He has a 22-inch neck, 22-inch biceps, and 22-inch calves. My waist is 36 inches – his thighs are 36 inches! His waist is 47 inches, and his chest is 62 inches. That means his chest is 5-foot-2 inches around. When asked in an interview what he eats, Shane said, "Whatever I see." In the Olympics this year, in two lifts, Shane lifted 947 pounds.

Did you know that Jesus calls us to lift a weight? It's not the kind of weight Shane lifts; in fact, Jesus tells us that we become stronger by lifting less weight. Hear his words in Matthew 11:25-30:

"Come to me." Probably the best-known and most beloved invitation in the whole Bible. Why is this passage so well-known and well-loved? Because we all have burdens and we all need rest.

Jesus' listeners had burdens, too. You know that Jesus was constantly in conflict with the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders of the time. He criticized them for focusing too much on obedience to the Old Testament law and missing the bigger picture. Jesus heals a person on the Sabbath, and instead of rejoicing at this miracle, the Pharisees criticize him for breaking the law by working on the Sabbath. They missed the big picture.

Because they were the religious leaders, they passed their legalistic view of faith onto their followers. For the Jews, you had to follow the law perfectly or else you were saddled with the burden of sin. In Matt. 23 Jesus says about the Pharisees: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others." The people who heard Jesus' invitation were not burdened with work or burdened with sin, they were burdened by the law, burdened with a faith dictated by obligations and requiring the impossible – the perfect following of the law. So Jesus offers an invitation to a different way of life, a different way of faith. Not a faith that burdens and breaks, but a faith that refreshes and renews.

Fast-forward to today. We are no longer burdened by the obligation to perfectly obey the law. We are no longer weary from trying to follow every “thou shalt not” in the Old Testament. And yet, we are still tired, and we still carry heavy burdens.

I don’t have to tell most of you the burden of having a newborn. I’m in no way taking for granted the joy of new life, but infants are just hard work. And there are so many do’s and don’ts with babies. I’ve read baby books that say don’t ever lay a newborn on their back, and other books that say don’t ever lay a newborn on their stomach. Who do you believe? I’m ready to build a rotisserie crib for her. Our lives seem filled with an endless list of do’s and don’ts that weigh us down and wear us out. So Jesus’ invitation sounds like sweet music. It’s a two-part invitation: Come and find rest – what’s that? And come and ease your load.

In the early days of automobiles, it was common for eating and drinking places to be built on the tops of long hills. They were not located there for the view. They were placed there for the convenience of people who needed to stop and let their overheated radiators cool down.

That is one of the functions of worship for many of us. This time together is the rest stop at the top of a long hill, where we can set aside our burdens for a little while, have the weight lifted off our shoulders, have our batteries recharged and let our radiators cool down before we set out again on our journey. This is a time to lay aside all the demands that weigh us down, all the rules and regulations about what we can and can’t do, all the responsibilities that bend our back, and just be in God’s presence. The Greek word Matthew uses for “rest” in this passage is the same one used for the temporary stop soldiers would take in between battles. It’s not the do-nothing rest of laying around in an easy chair. Worship is a time to be re-strengthened for the battles of daily living.

But worship can only be that for us if we let it be. We can also see worship as an obligation, as a burden: “Thou shalt not miss worship.” And then, when we inevitably do miss, another brick is added to the burden of guilt we may feel. We can see worship as rote, something we do on Sunday morning because there’s nothing else to do. We can see worship as one of many options to choose from each week. Or we can see worship for what it’s meant to be: an oasis, a rest stop, a place to have our souls tuned up and our spirits refilled. Worship can only serve that function for us if we let it.

The second part of Jesus’ invitation sounds contradictory to the first part. Come and find rest. Come and put on my yoke. What a second. We’re promised rest from our burdens in one breath and asked to take up another burden in the next. Our worldly logic tells us that regardless who’s offering it, a burden is still a burden.

I think Jesus would agree. There is no such thing as a burden-free life. The issue in life is not if we shall be burdened, but with what. The question is not if we shall be yoked, but to what and to whom.

The concept of the yoke is one with which some of us may not be familiar. A yoke was a piece of wood that joined together two oxen to make a team for pulling a plow or a wagon. The Greek word Jesus uses for “easy” also means “well-fitting.” As a carpenter, Jesus would have made a lot of yokes in his day. The ox was brought to the shop, and the measurements were taken. The yoke was then roughed out, and the ox was brought back to have the yoke tried on. The yoke was carefully adjusted so that it would fit well, and wouldn’t chafe and rub the ox’s neck. The yoke was tailor-made to fit the ox.

Jesus knows what burdens us: our anxieties and our fears, our temptations and our responsibilities, our failures and our guilt. And he offers to lift our heavy burdens and replace them, he offers to take off the yoke of obligation that sits ill-fitting on our shoulders and instead replace it with his easy yoke.

What's the difference? Let me put it this way. A boy with a messy room decides to clean it. I know, this is a purely hypothetical situation, but bear with me. He cleans his messy room. He can do so for two reasons: he can do it because he knows if he doesn't, he will be punished. Cleaning his room is an obligation. Or he can do it because he loves his parents and wants to please them. Cleaning his room is no longer a burden, it is a gift. We can serve God because we feel obligated, or because we want to please our Parent. The yoke of Christian service is not meant to be a burden, but a gift, a gift shared with us.

That's the amazing thing: a yoke is made for two. When Jesus offers us his yoke to carry, he's offering to become our yokemate, he's offering for us to learn how to bear the burden by working beside him. He's saying that the heaviness of life will seem lighter if we are willing to share it with him by worshipping him, throwing off our worldly burdens, and lifting the weight of his easy yoke.

Jesus' promise is not that we'll find a good vacation with him, that we will be able to get away from it all, but rather that he will refresh our souls when we come into his presence, and that when we venture forth into the world again – with him beside us -- that he will replace the burdens that destroy and exhaust us with a burden, and a yoke, that will be life affirming and easier to carry. We become stronger in our faith not by weighing down our life, but by sharing it with the one who walks beside us each step of our journey.